

**Brian Silverstein, Islam and Modernity in Turkey,  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011**

Funda Üstek

The Turkish hybrid of Islam and Modernity has been widely acknowledged in the social sciences. In the past few decades, a considerable amount of historical, political, and sociological research has concentrated on why Turkey diverged from other majority-Muslim countries in adopting the most clearly-set rules of secularism and Western-style democracy and governance. What is more, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Arab Spring, Turkey has been held up as a potential role model for the rest of the Islamic world. Though these studies have often demonstrated how modern Turkey diverged from its Ottoman past and in fact did everything to separate itself from this past, less attention has been paid to the continuities between the Ottoman past and the modern Republic. As the Turkish Republic approaches its centennial year, what can be said about modernizing the country through the liberal values of democracy and capitalism? Might some continuities from Turkey's Ottoman past also have enabled and legitimized this hybrid of modernity and Islam?

Brian Silverstein's *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* discusses two issues: first, how, throughout the modernization process, Islam as a religion has transformed from a community matter to a private matter based on personal choice of belief and practice; and second, why the vast majority of observant Muslims in Turkey have not found this transformation of Islam within the Turkish modernization process illegitimate or invalid. Silverstein builds a Foucauldian genealogy of Islamic discourse and practice in Turkey, bringing together his anthropological fieldwork in the late 1990s with the Gümüşhanevi branch of the Khalidi Naqshbandi order and a serious historical analysis of the role of Islam (especially Sufism) in Ottoman polity, including the transformed but enduring role of sheiks and their cemaats (parishes) in republican politics from 1923 onwards after the Republic banned all tekkes, dergâhs and zaviyes (dervish lodges). In looking for the unique modernization opportunities Islam encountered in Turkey in contrast to the rest of the Muslim world, Silverstein argues that there was already a tendency to hold secular attitudes toward religion and politics among the Islamic scholars in the Ottoman Empire (15). Hence, Silverstein emphasizes the need to study contemporary Islamic practices with respect to the histories of the institutions through which they have evolved (3). Consequently, the chapters of the book are organized to demonstrate how the Turkish present can be read from its Ottoman past.

In the first chapter in part 1, Silverstein discusses why 'Westernization' as a popularly used umbrella term is inadequate to describe the processes that led to the transformation of Ottoman institutions (31),

demonstrating that what came to be referred to as secularism was in fact established on Islamic grounds, owing to the fact that the Ottoman rulers needed new techniques and methods to govern Muslim communities in the Ottoman lands after the losses in the Balkan Wars.

In the second chapter, Silverstein explores the history of Sufism from its heyday in the Ottoman Empire to the new Republic's banning all involvement with the Sufi order. Silverstein initially traces the origins of how, in the education system, first the modern and religious schools were split into tekkes and medreses in the Ottoman modernization period, and then were altogether abolished in the republican period. For Silverstein, the split and later abolishment of the religious schools did not lead to a complete disappearance of Sufism, but was in fact intended to bring Sufis together and make their bonds stronger, now that their space for action was highly limited.

Part 2 is about "Disciplines of Presence" and illustrates why studying Sufism is central to understanding the development of Muslim sensibilities with regards to social forms, practices, and regimes of knowledge and power. For Silverstein, these disciplines play a particularly important role in deciphering why some Muslims join cemaats in Turkey, becoming, for instance, Naqshbandis or Nurcus, before they start building expectations from these social networks.

In the second chapter in part 2, Silverstein uses examples from his fieldwork to illustrate how these disciplinary practices are learned, spread, and acknowledged. Noting that romanticized notions of Sufism as mystical union with God (144) are not necessarily a major concern for Naqshbandi Sufis, Silverstein instead stresses the role of sohbet (which he translates as companionship-in-conversation) in unraveling the true Islamic practices (152) in a cemaat member's life. Hence, for Silverstein, only through maintaining a face-to-face dialogue within the community is the Muslim self constructed and Muslim subjectivity sustained (157).

Part 3 is about the hybrid of Islam and modernity in the Turkish context. In the first chapter, Silverstein discusses how the expansion of private media through technological innovations and economic (as well as political) liberalization has provided an opportunity to overcome Republican obstacles to continuing sohbet. In early Republican Turkey, Sufi tekkes were banned, following the Sufi order was considered a serious offence in law, and some sheiks migrated abroad (e.g., Esad Hodja to Australia). For Silverstein, radio sohbet has not only helped overcome some of these obstacles, but has also helped the community to sustain its ties and practices.

The final chapter is about "liberal Islamic religiosity." Silverstein compares and contrasts the different types of cemaat sustained through radio and face-to-face sohbet. For Silverstein, unlike face-to-face sohbet, radio sohbet does not provide a platform to discuss ideas and Islamic knowledge, and is hence a top-down broadcasted version of Islamic thought and a

disciplinary practice, since the only means of participation is listening. The author also discusses how conservative Muslims have been seeking a "normative hegemony" of Islamic ideals which would require everyone to share and abide by them. For Silverstein, all Islamic-oriented political parties on the Turkish political scene since the 1980s have tried to set these ideals, but the AKP government has played a particularly active role in this regard.

The book concludes by reiterating the importance of looking at the Ottoman roots of political, economic and social institutions and practices in modern Turkey to understand the widespread legitimacy of modern values of secularism, liberal economic values, and the notion of Islam as a private matter in Turkey.

Overall, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* effectively traces the historical continuities between the Ottoman and republican institutions. It provides some thought-provoking examples of how Islamic cemaat practices came to be sustained and in fact spread over the decades despite being completely banned in the Republic. Against this background, the author mentions that Naqshbandi Sufi order does not revolve around secrecy, at least not to the same extent as other types of cemaat (128–129). However, he does not detail how this specific Sufi cemaat came to enjoy its relative freedom. Moreover, the book would benefit from a more detailed account of the methodological aspect of the research. Specifically, how these cemaats were accessed and which members could (and could not) be interviewed were not particularly addressed. Moreover, although some quotes are found from participants' own accounts, these voices often get lost amongst the quotations from historical figures, archival documents, and epistemological contemplations.

Furthermore, although Silverstein tries to bridge the more than twenty-year gap between his fieldwork and this publication with a discourse analysis of current modes of norm-building by the governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), people's perspectives as to what counts as true Islamic practices might also have changed over those twenty years, during which Turkey has gone through major transformations. Although the AKP has retained majority rule for the past ten years, it is well known that neither the followers nor the party members are homogenous in their perspectives regarding Islam, and, in Silverstein's words, the AKP has not been able to achieve a normative hegemony yet. What is more, Silverstein does not problematize whether the AKP is really "modern" and "liberal" in any sense, and overlooks the AKP's less modern social policies and practices. Last but not least, Silverstein does not acknowledge that as much as social and media networks might play a role in introducing people to cemaats, they might also play a role in barring them from leaving them. Here, we also notice a careful neglect of the question of what happens to those who would like to leave a cemaat and what makes

---

them decide to leave while others prefer to stay. Without addressing these issues, or adopting a more critical stance towards the cemaats, we can over-interpret the personal and community gains they might provide, and over-stress their continuities with the Ottoman past. Silverstein's insider view of the cemaats tends to avoid problematizing any aspect of them, providing only a one-sided perspective.

This book is a deep and worthwhile exploration of the organization of Islamic policy-making in Turkey. Students of history and the sociology of religion would particularly benefit from the book, which offers a grounded account of how religious organizations emerge, develop, and maintain their existence, even when regimes, populations, and the principles governing political life change.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Funda Üstek** is a Doctoral candidate at the Department of Sociology of the University of Oxford. She works on issues of informal employment in the labor market, social security, and the organization of unregistered and undocumented workers.